

Ukraine and India's Strategic Autonomy: The Russian Twist

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Summary

The principle of 'strategic autonomy' that has long defined India's post-Cold War foreign policy was applied largely in relation to the United States and the West. The war in Ukraine and India's inability to call out Russian President Vladimir Putin's brazen aggression reveals that the constraints on India's freedom of action now come mostly from its dependence on weapons supplies from Russia. Given the depth of this dependence, reframing India's 'strategic autonomy' is bound to take time.

As Indian diplomacy struggles to navigate the war in Ukraine, the question of India's great power relations and its foreign policy doctrine have come into sharp focus. India's reluctance to criticise the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and its repeated abstention in the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) debates on the issue, have met with some [criticism from its Western partners](#) but have been hailed in Moscow as a ["balanced and independent" stand](#). While India can live with some Western criticism, Delhi cannot escape the fact that it is the Russian connection that now constrains India's 'strategic autonomy', which has been traditionally invoked in relation to the West.

Since the end of the Cold War, the idea of 'strategic autonomy' dominated India's foreign policy discourse. Some scholars of Indian foreign policy argued that 'strategic autonomy' is a ["realist mutation"](#) of India's non-aligned posture during the Cold War and that it has emerged as the principal identity of India's international relations in the 21st century. Others point to the emergence of the doctrine of ["multi-alignment"](#) as India significantly expanded its engagement with all the major powers, focused on greater regional activism and devoted new attention to international institutions of various kinds. The academic discourse on non-alignment and 'strategic autonomy' which frames Delhi's great power relations in structural terms misses the role of ideology in shaping India's foreign policy. The ideas of non-alignment and 'strategic autonomy' are discussed as exercises in value-free navigation between the great powers.

The legacy of anti-colonialism has unsurprisingly dominated the Indian worldview that emerged in the inter-war period. In seeking to develop an independent post-colonial foreign policy, India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, actively distanced the country from the West. At the same time, a large section of the elites at the centre and left of the political spectrum had developed genuine political warmth towards the Soviet Union. For the progressives, the Soviet Union was a natural ally in the struggle against neo-colonialism and the continuing hegemony of the West. For the new nation builders in post-colonial India, the Soviet Union offered not only an alternative to the West but also a model for accelerated development. For the foreign policy community, Russia was a valuable instrument in blunting the Anglo-American diplomatic activism on Kashmir in the UNSC;

Moscow was simultaneously a “bulwark” against the “balkanisation” of India’s unity and territorial integrity. For the Indian military planners, it was a reliable supplier of weapons in contrast to the unreliability of Western suppliers. The deepening distrust of the United States (US) through the Cold War was matched by growing popular trust and faith in Russia.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the fear of the unipolar moment dominated by the US saw India join Russia and China to form a political coalition to promote a multipolar world to limit American power. While suspicions of Beijing endured in Delhi, it was ready to go along with Moscow’s effort to build the trilateral Russia-India-China forum and the minilateral that brought in Brazil and South Africa. India’s determination to maintain the relationship with Moscow in the post-Cold War era was also rooted in the need to sustain the arms supply relationship with Russia that was deemed so critical for coping with a challenging regional security environment.

Yet, despite India’s continuing reliance on Russia in the post-Cold War period as a hedge against potential challenges from American power, Delhi’s ties with Washington have improved since the 1990s. The US today is easily India’s most important strategic partner. India’s annual trade in goods with the US at US\$110 billion (S\$149.2 billion) is nearly 15 times larger than the trade with Russia at US\$8 billion (S\$10.8 billion). The figure with Russia does not include military supplies, and this is where the problem of India’s continuing dependence on Russian arms arises. Although the US has emerged as an important supplier of arms to India, Russia still accounts for nearly 60 per cent of Indian military inventory; this has created a [lock-in effect](#) on India’s political relations with Russia. India’s dependence on Russian arms continues to trump the fact that Russia has drifted much closer to China, which has become a major security challenge for India on regional issues and is sharply critical of India’s engagement with the US on the Quadrilateral Security forum and other American initiatives in the Indo-Pacific.

Tied down by the arms relationship, India finds it hard to take positions critical of Russia’s international actions even when they are unacceptable. Put simply, the military dependence on Russia limits India’s freedom of action and its much-celebrated doctrine of ‘strategic autonomy’. Indian decision-makers do recognise the primary-level importance of reducing this dependence. In late February 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi [urged leaders of the Indian private sector](#) to invest more in domestic production of arms as [part of a broader reform](#) to reduce defence imports and build self-reliance in the production of armaments.

These measures, however, will take a long time to reduce the weight of imports in the Indian arsenal. Meanwhile, the continuing conflict with China on India’s northern frontiers makes the dependence on Russian weapons stark and consequential. India, which joined hands with Russia and China to enhance its ‘strategic autonomy’ from the US, now finds the military dependence on Russia constraining India’s freedom of action on global issues. Regaining India’s ‘strategic autonomy’ from Russia is likely to be hard and time consuming.

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